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ABSTRACT

The factors influencing minority students to apply for or run for student leadership offices at a predominantly white Christian college were studied. Four African American and two Hispanic American students in leadership positions at the college were asked about the reasons they applied for the leadership position and support or obstacles they encountered. Their responses suggest that minority students will become involved in leadership opportunities that create a sense of belonging for themselves and others, build a caring and accepting community, and foster deep intimate relationships. The findings also indicate that even on campuses where there are no negative factors, encouragement of minority students to become involved in student leadership is necessary to counteract the phenomenon of the neutral environment. An eight-step action plan is presented to help recruit minority students for leadership positions. (SLD)

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Factors Influencing Underrepresented Minority Student Leadership on a Predominantly White Christian Campus

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Introduction

Recently the issue of minority relations on college campuses has made headlines across the country. Headlines about racism, hate crimes, equal opportunity, affirmative action, and student and faculty minority ratios glare at us everyday. Often administrators and students of all races place blame on each other, and neglect to take the time to solve the problems. Christian Colleges and Universities now have a unique opportunity to provide environments where students, faculty, and staff of all races can teach and learn together in a safe but diverse community. In order for this to happen, all groups must feel that representation and that they have equal opportunity to apply for leadership position.

Unfortunately, a disturbing trend has developed over the past few years at predominantly white Christian colleges and universities. While many predominantly white Christian college and universities have a healthy minority population, these students very rarely apply for, seek election for, or achieve student leadership positions. This trend causes concern, and there is great interest in discovering which factors influence an underrepresented minority student to strive for a leadership position, so that predominantly white Christian institutions can create an environment that allows these factors to flourish, thereby encouraging underrepresented minority participation.

Research Question

"What factors influence an underrepresented minority student to apply for, or run for a student leadership position on a predominantly white Christian College campus?"

Some would ask why it is important to study this question. They may feel that leadership is inherent, and that students that are interested in leadership will apply for it. They might also say that if minorities do not apply for leadership that that proves that they have no interest in leadership. Observations over time indicate however, that this perception is highly inaccurate. Students of all races have factors that motivate them to achieve, and these factors differ for each group and each student. It is apparent that most predominantly white Christian campuses create an environment that encourages white student involvement, while unconsciously discouraging, or creating a neutral environment for minority students.

This research will attempt to find a trend in factors that positively influenced minority students, which will encourage development of services and programs that will help to create these factors. More importantly however, will be a paradigm shift on the part of institutions to accept minority students in leadership positions, and to consciously create the environment that self perpetuates positive influencing factors.

Research Participants

Research participants are current students at a mid-sized Mid West predominantly white Christian College who are currently in leadership positions, have occupied leadership positions at some point in their college career, or who have applied for leadership positions. The names of the participants have been changed.

Robert: African American Male, senior. Age: 22.

Robert is a current Resident Assistant, Manager of Activities at the Student Union, and a team captain for the Track team. During Robert's junior year, he was the Director of urban events for the Campus Activities Board.

Janique: African Female, senior. Age 21.

Janique was born in Zimbabwe, but her parents moved to the United States ten years ago when she was in elementary school. During Janique's junior year, she was a Resident Assistant, and currently is the Student Assistant to the Office of Financial Services.

Juan: Hispanic Male, junior. Age 21.

Juan, was born in Columbia and adopted along with his sister, by Caucasian missionary parents. Because of civil unrest, Juan's family moved back to the United States. Juan was the Vice President of his class during his sophomore year and currently is the Chaplain of a men's service organization. Juan was elected by the football team to the Football Unity Council, which resolves disputes within the team.

Karina: African American Female, sophomore. Age 21.

Karina applied to be a Resident Assistant for the current year, and obtained a position. However, during Resident Assistant training Karina realized that her spiritual philosophies did not align with those of Student Affairs, and she decided to step down from the position. Karina is involved in two Student Ministries that work in the inner city.

Elizabeth: Hispanic Female, senior. Age 21.

Elizabeth applied for a Resident Assistant position during her first year, but did not receive a position. Elizabeth also ran for a senate position for her junior year but did not receive the position. Elizabeth did not let these set backs stop her from serving and was selected to be the Director of Multicultural Events for the Campus Activities Board for the last 3 years. Now, during her senior year, she is also the Director of On-Campus Ministries.

Towanda: African American Female, junior. Age 19.

During Towanda's freshman and sophomore years, she was active in the Black Campus Organization (BCO), and during her sophomore year, she served as a Senator-at-large for Student Association.

Interview Questionnaire

The questions for the interviews are open ended to allow students the opportunity to share their experiences. Delving open-ended questions follow up on any closed ended questions. During the interview, the questions are not necessarily asked in the order below, but follow the natural progression of the student's shared experiences.

1) What reasons led you to apply for a leadership position?
2) Did someone encourage you to apply?
    a. What is the relationship between you and this person?
    b. Why did they?
    c. How did they do this?
    d. What was your response?
3) What events encouraged you to apply?
4) Were you discouraged from applying?
    a. What or who discouraged you from applying?
5) What qualities do you have that you feel qualified you for the position?
6) How did you find out about the position?
7) How did you learn about the application process?
8) What benefits did you hope to receive by obtaining the position?
9) What did you hope to give or offer to the position?
10) What was your thought process in deciding about applying?
    a. If some were negative, how did you overcome this?

Interview Results

The interviews were conducted between September 25, 2000 and October 5, 2000. These interviews mostly occurred at night in the Student Affairs Office to offer privacy and to prevent interruption. The interviews lasted anywhere from half an hour to an hour and a half. As stated earlier, the questions were not all asked in the same order, but rather followed the natural progression of the conversation. The results, however, are reported in the original order of the questions. The students answered some of the questions uniformly, but on other questions, their answers varied greatly. This demonstrates both the ability to learn from categorization and demographics, but also the dangers of stereotyping. This also demonstrates the beauty and gift of individualization.

QUESTION 1: What reasons led you to apply for a leadership position?

Robert saw a need and had a desire to see a change in the way that students view RAs. Robert believed that the institution needed more minority RAs, and he felt that he could be a RA that was more kind, merciful, and spiritual than those that he had experienced.

Many people mentioned to Janique that she would be a good RA, without her asking them about it.

Juan enjoys representing people as it allows him to give back to his friends. Juan has the ability to hang out with all kinds and groups of people and is accepting of all people. He hopes through his leadership example to create belonging for all students at the institution.

Karina felt that her first year RA did not do a good job and that she could do a better job of helping students adjust. Karina also felt that it would be a good way to serve.

Elizabeth was looking for ways to get involved. Elizabeth wanted to change the image of 'slacker' uninvolved minorities by becoming heavily involved herself and encouraging other minorities to become involved. She wanted to prove that being a minority would not hinder her. During Elizabeth's freshman year she went with other institutional students to a Minority Student Leadership Conference and that event was a large influencing factor in becoming involved for her.

Towanda had several people ask and encourage her to run for the Senate position.

It is interesting to note that three of the students responded with an answer that included their race, while the other three noted other reasons that are not race specific.

QUESTION 2: Did someone encourage you to apply?

All of the students mentioned that someone encouraged them to apply. Often it was multiple people at different times in the leadership application process.

Follow up: What is the relationship between you and this person?

There were five groups of people that were mentioned that encouraged students to apply for leadership position. The most common answer was friends, followed respectively by other students in leadership positions, Student Affairs professionals, family, and faculty.

Follow up: Why did they encourage you?

This question attempts to discover if students felt patronized by the encouragers because they were minorities. Fortunately, the students interviewed did not feel this way. Rather, their answers included the following responses:

a) Others saw the need for minority leadership participation. (This answer was accepted well if received from another minority student.)

b) They saw leadership qualities in the student.

c) They saw social skill qualities in the student.

Follow up: How did they do this?

Almost all of the students mentioned that this had occurred through casual conversations with the encouragers. However, in a few cases the students mentioned that a Student Affairs professional or faculty member had called them in specifically to talk about leadership. Several also mentioned the recommendation letter that they received from Student Affairs. Student Affairs at this institution asks faculty and current RAs for recommendations of students who have the qualities to be RAs. Student Affairs then sends a letter to these students and their parents informing them that they have been recommended for the RA position. This letter also includes the RA application process, and an invitation to come to an initial informational meeting.

Follow up: What was your response?

Two of the respondents reacted very positively to the encouragement and immediately made plans to apply for leadership positions. The other four, however, all

mentioned surprise at the encouragement at first, and did not take it too seriously. However, after repeated encouragements from the same, or different, people they started to take the encouragement seriously and began thinking more about applying for a leadership position. Some responded that when a Student Affairs professional or another minority student encouraged them that they then began to think about applying more seriously.

QUESTION 3: What events encouraged you to apply?

The students interviewed had varied and diverse responses to this question. Each answer demonstrates the uniqueness of the individual.

Robert had a positive conversation with the Dean of Students who encouraged him to apply.

Janique had a difficult financial situation at the time, and felt that the RA salary would help. Janique also had a phone conversation with her parents who encouraged her to apply.

Juan noticed that the previous year's class officers did not do a good job of including everyone, and he wanted to do a better job of including everyone.

Karina took notice of the promotional items that Student Affairs had put together to advertise the positions. This included signs, flyers, email announcements, and chapel announcements.

Elizabeth was encouraged to apply by attending the Minority Leadership Conference, and a spiritual awakening on an academic trip to the Dominican Republic.

Towanda noticed others that were involved in Student Government and thought that it would be fun to get involved. Towanda also mentioned that the Student Body President speaking in Chapel during her first year influenced her.

It is important to note that many of the students had multiple influences, encouragers, and interactions.

QUESTION 4: Were you discouraged from applying?

Four of the students stated that there were no discouraging influences in their decision to apply. Two students mentioned that they were nervous about applying, and this made them hesitate a bit. This demonstrates that a negative environment does not exist, but perhaps rather implies that a neutral environment exists that does not encourage minority participation.

Follow up: What or who discouraged you from applying?

Robert mentioned that he was nervous about the number of applicants that applied for the Campus Activities Board positions, and he was afraid that he would not receive the position.

Karina stated that she was nervous about interacting with people during the RA application process. She also stated that she was nervous about possibly having to interact with some people in her role as RA.

Both of these discouraging events are not unique to minorities and students of all races experience these feelings.

QUESTION 5: What qualities do you have that you feel qualified you for the position?

Robert believes that he is creative, spiritual, has a good sense of humor, experience in ministry, and is good in sharing his experiences.

Janique at first stated that she did not know what qualities she had, but then decided that she was personable and was easily able to relate to others.

Juan had a long list of qualities that included friendliness, past experiences, an understanding of people, and the ability to love them and show care for them. Juan also stated that he is hard working, and not afraid to show people that he cares about them.

Karina felt that she is a good listener and has a servant spirit.

Elizabeth believes that she has many good ideas, and the commitment to carry them out. She also is a good team player who is responsible and has integrity.

Towanda says that she is non-judgmental and is willing to help and serve. She also believes that being a minority was important to the role of Senator.

It is notable that all of these students were well aware of their leadership qualities, strengths, and abilities.

QUESTION 6: How did you find out about the position?

All of the applicants mentioned that they first learned of the position through one of the advertisement methods that the institution uses to communicate the positions. What is interesting is that while all applicants mentioned chapel announcements primarily, they also all mentioned different forms of advertising that caught their attention. These included email, campus mail, posters, flyers, and signs. Several of the

students mentioned that other students, who were already involved in that leadership role, talked to them about the position.

QUESTION 7: How did you learn about the application process?

All of the students had a similar answer to this question. Once they had expressed an initial interest in applying for the position, someone from either Student Affairs, or Student Government gave them the appropriate paperwork, and explained the process to them. Several attended informational meetings held by either Student Affairs or Student Government where they learned about the application process.

QUESTION 8: What benefits did you hope to receive by obtaining the position?

Once again, students answered this question with varied responses.

Robert wanted experience in leadership and counseling, and a sense of belonging and unity.

Janique hoped to receive the financial benefits of being an RA, as well as the desire to be 'out of her comfort zone.' She knew the position would be hard, that it would challenge her and that through it she would grow.

Juan felt that the officers the previous year had not done a good job and he wanted to improve the class and gain a sense of belonging. Juan felt that he would get satisfaction out of seeing others enjoy themselves.

Karina hoped to connect with others and develop deep relationships. Karina did not even realize that RAs received remuneration when she applied.

Elizabeth felt that her leadership experiences would be good for her resume and her future. She also enjoys being and feeling productive. She believed that the positions would allow her to meet others and to have fun at the same time as serving.

Towanda wanted to be a part of Student Senate to get a closer outlook on the administration of the college. She discovered though that at the institution, while the Senate has some power, they do not really help with the 'running' of the school.

While the students expressed various benefits there are three reoccurring themes that all of the students expressed. These three themes are to increase community, create or gain a sense of belonging, and to build relationships.

QUESTION 9: What did you hope to give or offer to the position?

Robert felt that he could offer a sense of humor, add to the sense of community, time, and Christian brotherhood.

Janique felt that she could offer continued real and deep relationships that went beyond her position.

Juan hoped to represent his friends and class well, as well as create an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging.

Karina wanted to help people connect and adjust during their first year. Karina felt that she had a positive first year experience and she want to help others have a positive experience.

Elizabeth wanted to help students to develop an interest in, and a respect for other cultures, while making events both fun and educational.

Towanda wanted to serve; especially by serving as a liaison to keep communication channels open between administrators and students.

Again, we see varied responses that have a common theme of a desire to have relationship with people while creating an accepting and caring community.

QUESTION 10: What was your thought process in deciding about applying?

Robert wanted to be accepted and wanted minorities to be involved. Robert felt that he could set an example for other minorities by involving himself. Robert also felt that it was important to 'stay busy for the Lord' during his years in school.

Janique at first did not think that she would want to be an RA, and she doubted her ability to do it. But the more people that talked with her, and the farther that she got in the application process, the more she felt that she would be able to handle the job of being an RA, and felt confident that she would be able to do a good job.

Juan felt confident that he would do well in the elections for his sophomore year and he received the position. However, during the elections for his junior year he felt nervous that he had tough competition. Juan also stated that he felt hindered by the class president his sophomore year when he was the class vice president. Juan did not win the election for his junior year. Juan did not let this stop him, and remained involved in other leadership activities.

Karina started the RA application process, then became scared of doing the private and group interviews, and actually dropped out of the process. (See follow up question for resolution of this).

Elizabeth felt that she needed to serve in some capacity and that there were many opportunities that she could take advantage of while she was at college. Elizabeth spent a lot of time in prayer seeking God's will for how she should serve.

Towanda at first felt that running for a senate position would be easy, and then she discovered that she was actually going to have to talk to people to get her petition for election signed. Towanda ran for the multicultural senator her first year but lost. During her first year at the institution, she realized that she was in the majority – by realizing that there were people worse off than she was. She purposely did not run for multicultural senator her second year but rather for senator at large as she did not want to be classified as a minority. She felt that it was easier to run for senator-at-large rather than for multicultural senator.

Follow up: If some were negative how did you overcome this?

Juan felt discouraged by his competition during his sophomore year, but decided to run anyway and he lost the election. Juan stated that he does not like to quit things, so he felt that he still needed to run even though he knew the competition would be tough.

Karina dropped out of the RA application process, but two different Resident Directors mentioned to her that they thought that she would do a great job as a RA, and they encouraged her past her fear, so that she decided to put herself back into the process.

Elizabeth applied for several different positions during her first year at the institution. Elizabeth did not receive the first two positions that she applied for, but did receive a position on the Campus Activities Board. She felt with each position that she failed to receive that God was showing her where He wanted her to serve Him.

Other themes discussed during interviews

In the course of the interviews, many different topics and themes kept surfacing that are important to document here.

Robert felt that most minorities are not involved because they do not feel that the institution "is truly our campus". Robert mentioned that minorities do not want to "be a part of" of the institutional community, but that they want to "be" the community. At first this appears to be semantics, but it portrays a sense of ownership and belonging that is necessary for a minority to feel before becoming involved.

Robert mentioned that the institutional community can start to help minorities feel like this is their community by bringing minority music to campus in various settings including chapel, as well as bring minority speakers to chapel at times other than black awareness week or multicultural week. If minority students felt that the institution is also their community, then they will want to be involved in it, and will strive for leadership roles.

Robert believes that many minority students believe that the minority students who take leadership roles are 'puppets' of the administration and are sell-outs. Robert realizes that he is a fence rider between the African American community and the rest of the college, and he hopes that in his role as an RA he can show that one can blend those roles effectively.

Robert also believes that for minority students, family plays a large role in determining success at college. Robert states that he believes that one of the differences between majority students and minority students is that majority students are interested

only obtaining a degree, and that minority students are looking to succeed. This success can come in the form of grades, leadership, position, and sport ability.

Juan stated that he had a desire to represent people like him. Juan also stated that minorities have a desire to be heard, and to be known. Juan believes that all students should attempt to understand others' points of view. Juan also feels that the institution expects more from the majority than from minorities, and he wants to break this paradigm.

Karina stated that she feels that minorities at the institution do not feel that leadership positions are available to minorities. Karina stated that only 'Neutral' minority students receive leadership positions, and that non-neutral students do not receive leadership positions. She clarified this by stating that minorities that do not fit the mold of acceptability to the majority do not receive leadership positions. Karina feels that if there was a non-neutral minority in leadership position that other minorities would apply for other positions.

Karina also mentioned that minorities are often ignored when it comes to planning activities and that the activities or events that do occur are done out of obligation. Karina also feels that the institution needs more minority faculty.

Elizabeth feels that minorities do not want to be stereotyped and that they want to take advantage of college. Elizabeth expressed frustration at students who had attended the Minority Leadership Conference with her who had lost desire for leadership once they came back to campus.

Towanda feels that leadership is dependant on what the person wants to do with his or her own natural drive. Towanda feels that minority students at the institution have

a perception that the administration on campus is unfair. Towanda feels that this is because administrators are not visible to students, and they do not interact with students. She feels that if this were to happen then minority students would feel that administrators were accepting of them, and the would probably aspire to leadership positions. Towanda also stated that she experienced that she was able to get support from her friends of all races in her pursuit of a leadership position.

An Answer to "What Factors Influence Underrepresented Minority Leadership on a Predominantly White Christian Campus?" – An Analysis of Responses

For a student to be a leader leadership qualities must exist regardless of the student's racial group. There is debate as to whether or not these leadership qualities can be taught. Evidence shows that leadership skills can be learned and applied to increase leadership potential. In order for a student to become a leader, they must first possess some of these skills. An educational institution must train students to develop these skills before putting them in leadership positions. However, one of the best training methods is practical experience, and sometimes students who are under prepared must be given opportunity to have these leadership experiences. Institutions must therefore offer varied leadership and training opportunities for students.

This research indicates that minority students will become involved in leadership opportunities that create a sense of belonging for themselves and others, build a caring and accepting community, and that foster deep intimate relationships. Therefore,

institutions must design and promote leadership positions as opportunities to foster and develop belonging, community, and relationships, in order to attract minority student participation.

The research also demonstrates that even on campuses where there are no negative factors, encouragement of minorities to become involved in leadership is necessary to counteract the phenomenon of the neutral environment. This often requires extra and special attention in recruiting minority students to leadership positions, beyond that necessary to recruit a majority student.

This extra attention comes best in the form of an encouraging genuine invitation to apply for a leadership position. This research also demonstrates that this cannot be a one-time encouragement, but rather must be a process of multiple interactions with a variety of people, in order for the minority student to feel the sincerity of the genuine invitation to apply for a leadership position. The most important encouragers to minority student leaders are their friends and peers, particularly of their own racial group. Closely following are encouragement from current student leaders, Student Affairs Professionals, and family.

Minority students best receive this encouragement in direct meaningful face-to-face conversations. Minority students should not be approached for leadership position because they are a minority student, but rather for the qualities that they can offer to the position. The best influencing conversations clarify and define the student's leadership qualities and potential, suggest specific rather than generic leadership opportunities, and are genuine. Often times, several conversations with different people are necessary to convince the student to apply for a leadership position.

While this research also indicates that the leadership application process is immaterial as a influencing factor in deciding to apply for a leadership position, encouragement along all parts of the application process is necessary for positive follow through.

An Action Plan for Increasing Underrepresented Minority Student Leadership

To obtain long term increased minority participation in student leadership it is necessary for institutions to make philosophical adjustments and paradigm shifts that budgetary commitments solidify. Some of these commitments include yearly attendance at Minority Leadership Conferences, and commitment to minority specific programming across campus.

Educators and Student Affairs professionals must emphasize "Strengths Finding" to encourage students in their positive strengths and qualities. Special attention must be given to minority students to encourage them to develop their natural strengths. Then genuine invitations can be given to minority students based on their strengths.

Institutional commitment to multicultural programming can be developed by recruiting minority students to be on the academic calendar planning committee, the chapel program committee, the Dining Hall meal committee, and the student run Campus Activities Board.

It is also important for high-level administrators such as the President, Vice Presidents, and Deans to become more visible at student led activities and sporting events, particularly at events sponsored by or for minority students. This will foster an environment of genuine care that students will sense.

Institutions must make the commitment to actively recruit 'non-neutral' minority students to leadership positions. The research indicates that this may help to self-perpetuate increased minority student leadership.

Action Plan for Actively Recruiting Minority Students to Apply for Leadership Positions

Based on the above research the following plan is recommended to actively recruit minority students to apply for leadership positions.

Step 1: Design leadership positions as opportunities to create a sense of belonging, build community, and develop sincere relationships.

Step 2: Promote leadership positions through all communication channels available (i.e. chapel announcements, flyers, email, posters, and letters) emphasizing the position definitions detailed in step 1.

Step 3: Ask Faculty, Student Affairs professionals (RDs and RAs), student leaders, and minority students for recommendations of minority students who have the leadership qualities necessary for the leadership roles.

Step 4: Send a letter to the student and their parents informing them of the recommendation and detailing the leadership application process.

Step 5: Follow up the letter with a series of personal interactions with that student and current student leaders, minority students, RAs, faculty members, and Student Affairs professionals. Each of these interactions should emphasize and define the leadership qualities and abilities of the student, and end with an encouragement to apply for a leadership position.

Step 6: Ask persons who made the initial recommendation to contact the student and encourage them to apply for the leadership position.

Step 7: When student shows interest in applying for a leadership position, immediately follow through with an explanation of the application process.

Step 8: If, once the selection process is complete, the student did not obtain a leadership position, encourage and help the student to look into alternative leadership options. This is important to keep the student from getting discouraged.

For the above action plans to be effective, Student Affairs professionals, Student Leaders, Faculty, and other Administrators must understand and support the plan. Time must be taken to adequately explain the process and train all involved parties in the art of support and encouragement.

Conclusion

Institutions must commit to a several-year process of paradigm shifting to help create positive encouraging environments for minority students, which are inclusive and inherently accepting. In order for this to happen, a commitment must be made to convert current negative or neutral environments, by actively engaging the institutional community in multiple genuine invitations to minority students to apply for leadership positions, based not on their race, but on their gifts, talents, and strengths.